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Erasing racism: Madison schools explore ways to bolster anti-racism efforts after several teachers use **racial slurs**

By **Negassi Tesfamichael**

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Given the longstanding achievement gap in Madison between black and white students, which follow racial achievement gaps seen statewide year-after-year, the move by the Madison Metropolitan School District to launch a Black Excellence Plan last summer made sense to many.

The plan, which was incorporated into the district's strategic framework, included a pledge from the district to focus on creating a community coalition that would "design new ways to care for and meet the social-emotional and academic needs of black students," and "make our district and our community better for all."

But the achievement gap wasn't the only challenge students, staff and families had to deal with this school year in a district with nearly 13,200 non-white students, making up about 57 percent of the enrollment. Eighteen percent of students in MMSD are black.

Five times this school year, an MMSD teacher or substitute teacher has used a racial slur in front of a student. Hamilton Middle School experienced the first reported incident on Oct. 31, 2018.

At Hamilton — named after Velma Hamilton, a trailblazer in Madison’s education and civil rights communities and founder of the Madison chapter of the NAACP — a white teacher intervened in a conversation between two students, responding to a black student, “How would you like it if I called you a n-----?”

Only 6 percent of students at Hamilton, located in the Hill Farms neighborhood on Madison’s west side, are black.

Though that teacher eventually resigned, the incident was not an isolated one. Since then, teachers at Jefferson Middle School and West High School, along with substitute teachers at East and West, have reportedly **used racial slurs** in the classroom and subsequently left their positions in the district. A similar incident was reported with a teacher at Middleton High School last month. And a teacher in the Kenosha Unified School District was caught **using a racial slur** on video in December.

The string of incidents has forced the district to grapple with how to have more productive conversations about race and identity, as well as how to heal after events cause trauma and harm to students and the school community. It has also shed light on a critical realization many educators have had when it comes to anti-racism efforts, especially from white educators: the work is ongoing and never stops.

‘A sense of urgency’ at Hamilton Middle School

At Hamilton, there was shock and a wave of emotions that ran through the school community in the days after the Oct. 31 incident.

“There has obviously been a sense of urgency,” said Tova Sacks, an academic and career planning coordinator at Hamilton. “When the incident happened, it shook the school, students, families and staff.”

Jordan Meiller, a sixth-grade teacher at Hamilton, and several of her colleagues founded the group Educators Working Towards Anti-Racism in the days following the incident. The group’s aims include having conversations about race, particularly with white people. The group also has worked to create a network to support anti-racist teachers so they feel connected and not isolated.

“For (teachers in the anti-racism group), it was an opportunity to stand up when we weren’t necessarily as loud about it before and realizing that together we could do a lot more,” Meiller said.

Part of their work has included sharing lessons on how to have conversations with middle school students about race and identity, which can be tough topics.

“You just kind of have to do it,” said Adama Guede, a sixth-grade teacher at Hamilton who is part of the Black Educators Network, a group that started in 2015 to provide a safe space for black educators to talk about issues such as a lack of diversity and creating culturally responsive curriculum. “It’s a conversation where it’s difficult, but if you don’t have it, things are just going to stay that way. We told our students that we know this is going to be a touchy subject, and might be controversial or difficult to talk about, but if we don’t talk about it nothing is going to change.”

Just under 7 percent of MMSD staff are black, according to DPI data. About 2.8 percent of teachers in MMSD are black. The Black Educators Network is a resurrected version of a previous group from the 1980s and 1990s called the African American Education Network.

Guede said lessons have focused on making everyone's opinion and voice heard, and **how words can impact others regardless of their intent.**

“They (students) really rose to the occasion. We gave them that space to talk about it and create community,” said Brandon Tewault, a Hamilton teacher and member of Educators Working Towards Anti-Racism.



Jordan Meiller, a sixth-grade language arts teacher at Hamilton, helped start the Educators Working Towards Anti-Racism group at Hamilton following a racial slur incident on Oct. 31.

Michelle Stocker

After the Hamilton incident, the Black Educators Network went to Superintendent Jennifer Cheatham with a list of demands to address the incident and eventually subsequent incidents.

The list includes increasing professional development around anti-racist work, supporting school communities when racist incidents happen, think through how the district critical response team handles these incidents, having the district take an active anti-racist stance, and making sure everything the district does is done through an anti-racist lens. They're currently waiting to meet with Cheatham and her team again to discuss progress in meeting those demands.

“We initially started as a way to create a safe space for black educators, whether it's teachers, staff, anyone who has contact with children,” said Rachelle Stone, a fourth-grade teacher at Huegel Elementary School. “We first pushed the district to make sure the curriculum was culturally relevant. It wasn't until this year that we focused on combating these incidents and white supremacy.”

Stone said the demands were aimed at teachers the group feels are unqualified to teach in the district.

“Our goal is to get at the root of the problem and really recognizing that there are some teachers who should not be in classrooms, that having them in our district is harming our black students when they use racial slurs and derogatory language,” Stone said.

Stone said she's hopeful the district will hold itself accountable in light of these incidents.

"Teachers and anyone who is interacting with kids has to have an anti-racist mindset in order to dismantle white supremacy," Stone said. "It's not enough to say we're are culturally competent because we did a read-along or have some posters. The district has a lot of work to do around that, whether it's really changing the recruitment processes, how we deal with situations where a person is not working with black students, etc. The district has a lot to think about how it serves its black students."

There's been an acknowledgement from district officials that these incidents have had a ripple effect on staff and families as well as students.

"I've been bolstered by the support and guidance provided by the Black Educators Network, which is a powerful organization that is demanding change," Cheatham said.

Stone said she thinks Cheatham has taken a more active role and that she hopes BEN fosters a good relationship with the district so their demands become a reality.

"I definitely think change is happening in incremental steps," Stone said.

"Obviously, I would love for us to wake up tomorrow and have it all solved ... we want to foster a relationship with the district so they take on this anti-racist work and we can hold them accountable."

EWTAR has about 30-35 members and meets every month, according to its organizers. They want to have more educators join from more schools across the district. At each meeting everyone attempts to develop a racial equity goal they can work toward personally, professionally and in the classroom.

Some of the lessons used by Hamilton teachers and others across the district included plans prepared for the Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action, an early February event sponsored by Madison Teachers Inc. MTI is renewing focus on its equity training since the racial slurs incidents have occurred.

Last month, teachers from across the district heard from Jesse Hagopian, a high school teacher in Seattle who is the co-editor of the book “Teaching for Black Lives.” The event was voluntary, and about 100 attendees heard about Hagopian’s activist work.



Rachelle Stone is a fourth-grade teacher at Huegel Elementary School who helped start the Black Educators Network in 2015, which replaced an older group that had a similar name. In the days after the Hamilton incident, members of the Black Educators Network went to Superintendent Jen Cheatham with a list of demands to improve the racial climate of MMSD.

by Saiyna Bashir

Educators hit the books on racial equity

The incidents have pushed many white teachers to educate themselves on black history, equity and racial justice in education.

Teachers at Hamilton and East, among other schools, have organized book groups with reading lists including “For White Folks who Teach in the Hood,”

“White Fragility,” “Witnessing Whiteness,” and “So You Want to Talk About Race,” among others.

Hamilton principal Jessica Taylor and assistant principal Nichole VonHaden said book groups are just one way school staff have been working to try and heal.

“With an event like this that is so traumatizing, you have no choice but to do some pretty aggressive healing structures so that you can heal quickly and over the long-term,” VonHaden said. “But I also think that the event has brought everything to the surface and has galvanized people into really saying, ‘This can never happen again, ever.’”

Students and staff have separately participated in restorative justice circles to talk about issues of race and identity as well. Some staff have been taking Justified Anger’s “Black History for a New Day” course on Monday evenings at Fountain of Life Church.

VonHaden explained that it’s been a process to get educators to discuss racism, as not everyone has had the same experiences or exposure to anti-racist work.

“Everyone is on a different journey to understanding that. Some people have a very clear, up-close and deep understanding of the negative impacts of racism. Some people think racism is just being mean to people of color,” VonHaden said. “They don’t understand the systemic pulleys and levers that work together to function in a way that racism in many ways is hidden in plain sight.”

Parent organizations have taken notice and in recent years have found ways to support the anti-racist work of teachers.

“I think for white parents especially, there’s been an awakening over the last six years on some of these issues,” said Ceri Jenkins, a PTO member at Midvale and Lincoln elementary schools. “A lot of white parents don’t want to talk about issues of race and culture with their kids, showing they are either afraid to or feel they don’t have the tools to talk about it with their kids.”

At Midvale and Lincoln, Jenkins said parent organizations have tried to organize events and other ways to support the work of teachers who are confronting racism in the classroom.

Midvale and Lincoln were paired in the early 1980s as a voluntary desegregation plan in response to an investigation by the federal Education Department’s Office for Civil Rights. Under the same plan, Franklin and Randall elementary schools were also paired.

But the classroom isn’t the only place where teachers are discussing how to talk about race. The incidents have also placed a sense of urgency on the district’s professional development team’s goals for next year, according to Sue Gorud, the director of professional learning and development at MMSD.

All MMSD employees will be required to go through a YWCA course to examine racial identity this fall. One of the upcoming professional development days was scheduled to include a module about how to talk about

race and how not to talk about it. Though some professional development days were cancelled because of snow days MMSD has to make up, staff will still be able to get the training once it's finalized.

“These have been directly in response to the issues we've seen with the hate language being used,” Gorud said. “We know that we have to be very specific on what our stance is, and the kind of unsafe climate that these incidents create for our students and families.”

Gorud acknowledged that more work will need to be done beyond just one training day, but that a continued focus on this work will slowly bring significant changes.

“This is adaptive work. When you think about the history of our country, 400 years of oppression, it's not something that we are going to magically provide a day of professional learning and it's all going to change,” Gorud said. “Our hope is that our ongoing professional learning and adherence to what we state as our values will, in time, bring changes.”

Whether these changes will yield significant results remains to be seen. MMSD is already perhaps one of the most progressive districts in the state in terms of its focus on promoting anti-racism in its policies.

But the challenge is exacerbated by the fact that racism exists beyond school communities and in society in general.

“The recent incidents involving racial slurs has shown that despite the work we have done, there is still much left to work on,” said one local elementary educator who asked not to be named. “This is true in schools as it is

everywhere in our society, as we all have racial biases and systems that perpetuate racism.

“This is not just about individuals, or the schools. It is about our community, our systems and structures, our laws, and our internal biases as white citizens. To blame the schools is simplistic and reinforces our racist systems as others outside the school setting can feel that they are not part of the problem.”

The challenge of moving from conversations to more substantive actions is also a frustration for some.

“I feel like we’re able to have conversations, and a lot of people talk about it, but a lot of times that’s the extent to which anything happens,” said Leila Fletcher, a junior at West High School. “There’s no action after the talking.”

Cris Cruz, who’s also a junior at West and a member of the school’s Black Student Union, agreed with his classmate.

“We talk about (race). (Teachers) do, but that’s the end of it,” Cruz said. “It sucks that we’re not really addressing it. But on the other side, how do you really address these incidents? Because it ends up dealing with teachers’ values.”

Cheatham said MMSD’s current efforts are different from previous ones in that the district’s anti-racist stance is more clear.

“This is the first time we’ve named a commitment to anti-racism as an institution,” Cheatham said.

How MMSD responds when an incident occurs

The nature of these racial slur incidents has affected how district administrators respond.

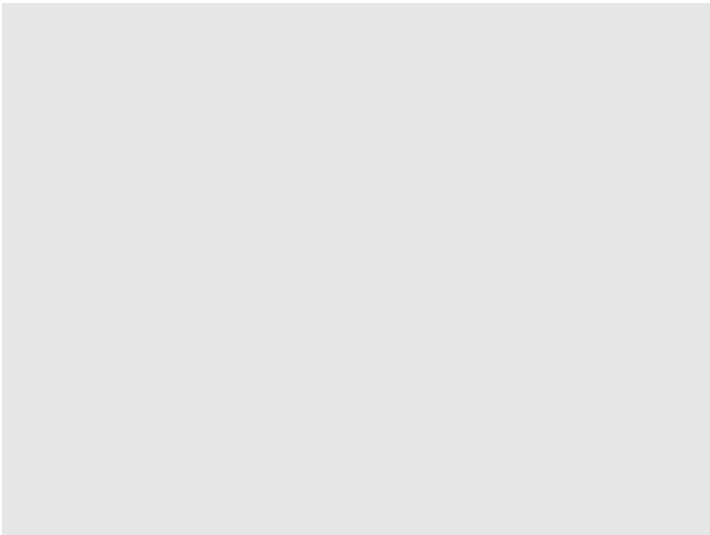
“One of the things we’ve uncovered throughout this process, specifically with these issues with racial slurs, is the level of social media that has been utilized,” said

Deirdre Hargrove-Krieghoff,

MMSD’s human resources director. “For people who are experiencing these issues, they are very open and quick to post on social media, which is something that we have had to adapt and adjust to, of really communicating and being as transparent as we can be.”

Human resources issues that deal with personnel are treated confidentially, according to Hargrove-Krieghoff, which is why many of the notices to parents sent by the district haven’t named teachers or described the specific context of each incident.

Hargrove-Krieghoff said there are a variety of human resources issues that get sent over to the district’s critical response team that usually don’t require as public of a response. In the racial slur incidents, district officials have realized how quickly information spreads and the harm that it may cause to those affected, leading to a more open response.



Signs made to promote diversity hang on the walls at Hamilton Middle School alongside Maya Angelou's poem "Still I Rise."

Michelle Stocker

“We grappled with this (how to be more transparent) for some time. The place where we landed — it’s really talking specifically about incidents,” Hargrove-Krieghoff said. “Where incidents happened, being explicit about a racial slur.”

Cheatham’s chief of staff, Ricardo Jara, explained that when a racial slur incident gets reported to the district, a critical response team made up of about seven administrators meets to assess the severity of the situation. They then enter a fact-finding phase where the principal of a school and usually a human resources official interviews anyone involved, including any witnesses if necessary, in addition to gathering documentation. There are various levels of misconduct that guide the recommendation process on what happens to a staff member.

Staff accused of using a racial slur are usually put on administrative leave while an investigation takes place. When cases of a staff member using a racial slur are found to be true, employment with the district is ended, according to an email Cheatham sent to staff earlier this month.

The district has also dispatched its restorative practice teams to schools where incidents have happened, using a circle-process that gives students, staff and parents a chance to make sense of the incident and heal.

“The circle process for sense-making and healing has been really powerful for us, and something we will continue to do,” Cheatham said.

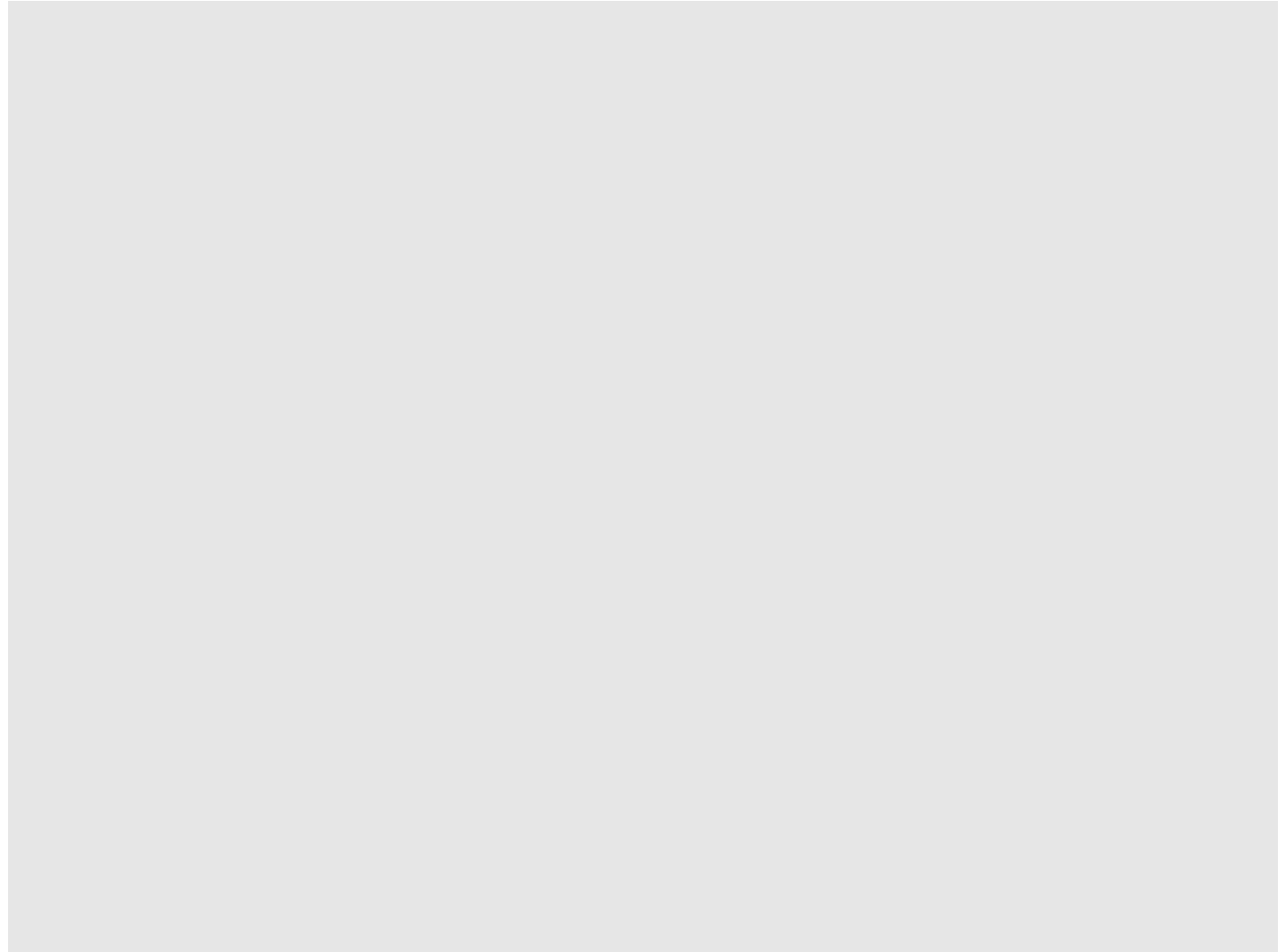
Members of the restorative practices team said their work must be part of the district’s overall racial justice work.

“I’ve definitely learned that restorative justice work and racial justice work is inextricably linked,” said Lonna Stoltzfus, a social worker who is part of the restorative practices team.

Ultimately, the district wants its restorative practices work to be proactive so they’re not just responding to incidents, according to Jay Affeldt, the district’s director of physical, behavioral and mental health.

“Restorative justice is not just something you would do when something goes wrong, and it’s not just having a conversation,” Affeldt said. “It’s about ultimately creating a true sense of community and finding a way to create that sense of belonging for everyone.”

Angie Hicks, the principal of Wright Middle School, said it’s important for her school to use restorative practices to be more proactive and build a sense of community in her school even though a racial slur incident hasn’t been reported there this year.



MMSD Superintendent Jen Cheatham acknowledges that racial slurs incidents have likely happened before this school year, but that she is encouraged by students being willing to report what's happening this year. Working to stop perpetuating racism will "continue to be our lifetime work," she said in an interview.

Michelle Stocker

Where do schools go from here?

With professional development lined up, book groups and lesson plans made, there's a sense of optimism among teachers that school communities can heal from these incidents.

But it's clear the incidents have shined a light on an issue that Cheatham said has probably been happening for a long time.

“This experience has reminded me that leading for **black excellence** requires that we both lift up our students, celebrate and support them — and stay committed to their truth and reality,” Cheatham said to staff last week at a quarterly conference of school leadership teams. “If we are going to be an anti-racist institution, we have to face the reality that racism exists in and around us. And it’s our job to stop perpetuating it. I know it has made me more resolute than ever as an anti-racist educator — in the big and small moments, at work and at home, internal and institutional.”

Cheatham noted in an interview that she’s glad students are willing to report the incidents that have happened.

“We’d like to think we have some students in particular who are stepping up and telling us what they are experiencing, and the fact that we have students willing to report that helps us to be able to address them more directly,” Cheatham said. “The more that we can show them that we’re not going to dismiss the reporting of any experience of racism in our schools or classrooms, I hope will over time build more trust and actually help us live the core values we put on paper.”

It’s a process that will extend beyond one school day or one school year.

Combating racism “will continue to be our lifetime work, and it is our obligation to continue to do the inside work necessary to stop the perpetuation as well as the institutional work,” Cheatham said.

The administrators at Hamilton agree that the process is far from over.

“This is just the beginning,” Taylor said. “We’re going to continue our work, continue to define **black excellence** ... we’re going to lead and do whatever we can to support our students, particularly students of color.”

Members of the district’s restorative justice team agree.

“This work is always ongoing. It’s hard and a deep and slow process ... sometimes people want to say, ‘It’s done, let’s check it off a list,’ but it’s much deeper than that,” said Cynthia Moore, a member of the restorative justice team.

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